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Performative Translation: Latvia's Orbita Group as a Post-Monolingual Heterotopia

The Orbita multimedia and poetry collective, based in Riga, Latvia, has succeeded in making poetry written in Russian an integral part of the Latvian cultural and literary scene, despite the burden borne by Russian language and culture in this society as a result of still unsettled and contested histories of Russian and Soviet imperial domination and cultural imperialism. The article explains this achievement as resulting from the Orbita collective's practices of "performative translation," which make translation a highly visible and central element of various forms of artistic activity, including multimedia installations, book publishing, video poetry, public performance, proper, and more. In traditional cultural configurations, translation is thought to transfer the essential features or the spirit of a text from one literary language to another in a manner that makes possible the translation's readers' sense of unmediated contact with the original. Such a conception of translation supports the monolingual paradigm – the cultural ideology of separate and distinct national languages – and the political actualities to which it corresponds. Orbita's practices of performative translation, in contrast, create a multilingual heterotopia in which the actuality of translation as mediation is rendered visible, the boundedness and distinctiveness of national literary languages is undermined, and the social necessity and ubiquity of acts of translation is brought to the fore.

Keywords: Orbita, translation, performance, postmonolingual, Latvian poetry, Russian poetry, Russophone poetry

> Compatriots of every country, translator-poets, rebel against patriotism! Do you hear me! Each time I write a word, a word that I love and love to write; in the time of this word, at the instant of a single syllable, the song of this new International awakens in me.
>
> Jacques Derrida, "Monolingualism of the Other, or The Prosthesis of Origin"

I know – the only thing that cheers up the gang from Tallinas St.
is a big car racing by at excessive speed,
and behind the wheel is a young courtier, explaining in Latvian
the pleasures of purchase by credit... "By the way, better not to walk here
after dark…" ...when on a fixed, even if modest, income.
"But in a certain southern country there's a special agency, which secretly
scatters small change across the morning cities... I read about it in the papers...
And so it costs the government next to nothing to keep people in a good mood,"
he sums up joyfully. "I tell you, the bureaucratic profession
one way or another leads to moral collapse," the correspondence student of the
St. Petersburg Academy of the Arts draws his conclusions with no thought for the car's driver.
Everyone laughs a bit, to defuse a possible conflict... In silence we cross Čaka St.
on yellow. We'll ride together for five more minutes. The driver flips on the radio...
After the news, I ask Imant, sitting there silently, what he,
as a veteran designer, prefers – PC or Mac? He replies, in pretty good Russian,
that he stopped seeing it in such stark terms a while back, but he only works on a Mac.
"We just don't have any PCs at the agency..." "...I'll get out by the old Rigas Modas building..."
"...By the way, how do Russians... I mean..." he wants to ask something
about the peculiarities of PCs, but mixes up computers with my nationality and breaks off...
"Funny," from the front seat the student jumps in on the awkward moment,
"I noticed long ago that when someone names your nationality in a different language
or with an accent, it always sounds sort of insulting, yeah... Or when you yourself say 'Gypsy,'
there's no terminological neutrality, you know? And with Chukchis, forget about it..." :)
He stops, expecting we'll laugh... A familiar song begins in the silence.
But the gang from Tallinas St. can be cheered up only by a huge Jeep,
racing along in the late evening at excessive speed.

Я знаю – шпану с улицы Таллинас развеселит
только большая машина, мчащаяся мимо слишком быстро,
за рулем которой молодой придворный рассказывает нам на латышском
об удовольствии от приобретений в рассрочку... «Здесь, кстати,

лучше не ходить ночью...» ...при постоянном, пусть даже небольшом, доходе.
«А в какой-то стране на юге существует специальная служба, она тайно
разбрасывает мелкие монеты в утренних городах... Читал об этом в новостях...
Так что хорошее настроение людей почти ничего не стоит властям», –
радостно подводит он итог. «Я же говорю, чиновничья профессия
так или иначе ведёт к нравственному распаду», – ничуть не стесняясь хозяина машины,
делает свои выводы заочный студент Петербургской академии художеств.
Все коротко смеются, чтобы смягчить возможное столкновение... В тишине
пересекаем Чака на желтый. Минут пять нам еще по пути. Хозяин включает радио...
После новостей спрашиваю Иманта, молчащего рядом, что он,
как матерый дизайнер предпочитает – PC или Mac? На неплохом русском он отвечает,
что уже давно не поддерживает такой конфронтации, но сам работает только на Mac'е.
«Просто в агентстве у нас нет PC...» «...Я выйду возле бывшего Ригас Модес...»
«...А, кстати, как русские делают... То есть...», – он хочет спросить что-то
об особенностях PC, но путает компьютеры с моей национальностью и осекается...
«Забавно», – с переднего сиденья подхватывает неловкость студент:
«Давно уже заметил, что собственная национальность, названная на другом языке
или с акцентом, всегда звучит как-то оскорбительно, да... Или сам скажешь: цыган,
и нет уже той словарной нейтральности, правда? А чукча, так вообще...» :)
Он смолкает, ожидая нашего смеха... В тишине начинается всем известная песня.
Но угрюмую шпану с улицы Таллинас развеселит только огромный джип,
мчащийся поздним вечером слишком быстро.

Artur Punte, "I know – the only thing that cheers up the gang from Tallinas St…," 2002

I. Local, yet Deterritorial

In the summer of 2019: my daughter and I attended a concert of the Riga-based avant-rock group Nikto.[1] At the bar, no one was ordering drinks in Russian. The

[1] Some material included in this article was adapted from *Border Conditions: Russian-Speaking Latvians between World Orders*, by Kevin M. F. Platt, a NIU Press book published

audience was ethnically mixed, tilting heavily to Latvian, but even the local Russophones were speaking primarily in Latvian, as is generally the case on the young and cool scene in Riga. While it is impossible to draw totalizing conclusions, exclusively or dominantly Russian-language contexts in Riga, of whatever generation, tend to map onto culturally conservative and Russia-identified spaces and circles. Although they may broadcast the show-business glamour of the New Wave Competition of Young Performers, a Russian-centric pop music event that took place on the Latvian seashore in Jūrmala from 2002-2014 and one of the most prominent Russophone Latvian cultural happenings of those years (a project of the Russian television industry, it should be mentioned), which I have discussed elsewhere, such contexts are typically not what a young person could call "cool," and often shade over into the decidedly frumpy.[2] Russian language and culture, displaced by the Soviet civilizational breakup, extending across the borders of time and space into present-day Latvia, often appears by its geographical and temporal position to be cast in the role of belatedness, rendering even glamour, when pronounced in Russian, only a faded memory of past fashionability. The obverse, also non-totalizing rule that was in evidence at the Nikto concert: if you go to a cool scene in Riga these days, it is *almost* certain to be characterized by Latvian language use, regardless of the degree to which Russian-speakers are present. This tendency is especially pronounced in younger crowds, where the results of nearly three decades of intent transformation of educational policy have resulted, at last, in practically universal bilingualism among local Russian-speakers. But let's unsettle these equations. Strikingly, the main act that night was in Russian. Nikto, which spells its Russian name (meaning "no one") in Latin characters, is comprised of Russian-speaking Latvians and its songs are all in Russian. Even more striking: in this context, the fact that the group sings in that otherwise uncool language only seemed to work towards an increase in its 'coolness dither.'

Later the same summer, on an evening walk in Jūrmala with the Russophone Latvian poet Semyon Khanin, distant sounds of peculiar, almost operatic singing distracted us from our conversation (about poetry translation – what else?). We navigated towards the sound and soon found ourselves gazing over a picket fence at a housewarming party in the manicured yard of a large and comfortable, newly constructed summer home. The sounds we had heard were from the performance of a live band playing synth pop to entertain a crowd of fashionably dressed thirty-somethings, sipping cocktails and eating modernistic hors d'oeuvres. Khanin recognized the singer, who waved us into the party, where the host welcomed us when he learned we were 'with the band.' Once again, conversation among the guests was almost exclusively in Latvian, but the enter-

[2] On the New Wave festival, see: Platt (2013a: 447-469).

tainment was not. The performer was Vladislav Nastavshev, the acclaimed Russophone Latvian theater director, and the songs were his original settings of classics of Russian Silver Age poetry, beloved of the 'cultured' late Soviet intelligentsia – Marina Tsvetaeva, Sergei Esenin, Aleksandr Blok, Boris Pasternak, Anna Akhmatova, and others – in a performance style that sounded alternately like a revival of British New Wave and a Dua Lipa track.

The highly complex history and contemporary state of language politics in Latvia may be summed up in brief with recognition that Russian language use remains a highly politicized open question, as a result of decades of Russian cultural imperialism under the guise of Russophone "all-Soviet" cultural norms and institutional hierarchies, followed by what the political scientist Michelle Commercio has described as post-Soviet "antagonistic nationalization" intended to reestablish the priority of Latvian language and culture.[3] Russian language and culture in Latvia has gone through many ups and downs since 1991, but the upshot at present is that it remains a problem – the language of the former occupier and a violently aggressively looming neighboring state, subject to regulation and limitation that continues to sit poorly with the large proportion of the population for which it is native. In 2012, a referendum to make Latvian a second language of state was soundly defeated, leading Anna Stroi, a multilingual, committed Latvian citizen and member of Latvia's bilingual journalistic establishment who once considered a career in local politics, to comment to me with some bitterness that "my language is and will remain an enemy language here." Yet as the two examples above make plain, Russophone culture is not always and everywhere in Latvia condemned as such. Sites of Russophone cultural production here are not always configured, like the New Wave Competition, as a separate zone of Russianness, standing apart from Latvian-speaking society. Yet what makes it possible for Russophone culture to exit such zones, given the historical burden and contemporary politics of language use? How do artists like Nikto and Nastavshev position Russian language and culture to render them not only acceptable forms of artistic expression, but even especially cool? What makes it possible for hip young Latvians to vibe to the poetry of Aleksandr Blok?

Many, perhaps most Russophone cultural actors and projects in Latvia persist under the spell of a lost unity with an imagined whole of Russian culture, centered on Moscow. Often, such projects are confounded by the actuality of Russophone Latvian culture, sundered from the Russian Federation, displaced, hybridized, and fragmentary. One might propose that Nastavshev and Nikto, in contrast, adopt an alternative stance of embracing the status of hybrid, dislocated fragment, rather than mourning a lost whole. Yet we should also observe that neither entirely breaks ties with 'mainland' Russian culture to become some-

[3] Commercio (2010). For an earlier account of the status of Russian language and identity in independent Latvia, see Laitin (1998). See also: Platt (2013b: 271-296); Platt (2015: 305-326).

thing new and different in Latvia. To take only the case of Nastavshev, his biography has taken him from a childhood in Riga, to university education in St. Petersburg, studying with the legendary Russian director Lev Dodin, to a degree in directing in London. Following some early directorial work in London, he returned to make his name in Riga, but his activity and fame soon extended emphatically back into the Russian Federation, where he has directed productions in Moscow's cutting-edge Gogol Center, overseen by the celebrated and legally embattled Kirill Serebriannikov, and where he engaged in the creation of major productions for the Bolshoi Theater. His résumé of projects combines classics of world literature (Tennessee Williams, Federico García Lorca) with legendary Russian outsiders (Mikhail Kuzmin) and émigrés (Ivan Bunin). If Nastavshev enacts a hybrid, dislocated, or fragmentary conception of Russian culture, it is also a peculiarly cosmopolitan version of the fragment, one that competes with the 'whole and the integral' Russian culture on its home turf.

At base, what is at issue here is a problem not of parts and wholes, but rather of the limitations of those metaphors of spatiality and unity as applied to languages, national cultures and their geopolitical positions. Over the last half-decade, I collaborated with a disciplinarily diverse group of specialists to investigate various cases of Russian and Russophone cultural activity outside of the Russian Federation and its predecessor states, which led to the 2019 volume "Global Russian Cultures." As we concluded, "both within and without the Russian Federation, Russian culture is fragmented and multiple, and everywhere it is the object of diverse and contradictory institutional, political, and economic forces that seek to define and constrain it."[4] Yet also, all contested, local Russian and Rusophone cultures are equally global. In Maria Rubins's formulation, "Remaining in dialogue with metropolitan culture and the national tradition, local cultures simultaneously transcend them, engage in transnational conversations, and create constellations out of diverse aesthetic and ideological vocabularies."[5] Our project sought to explode the ideology that naturalizes cultural life as singularly defined within politically circumscribed territories – that holds that Russian culture, naturally, is a "thing" made in Russia – describing all else as diasporic, migrant, displaced, or adulterated. In a post-imperial world, where multiple states include significant populations of Russian-speakers, it is an accident of fate and a reflection of the workings of power that grant the Russian Federation and those who exert hegemonic control over its public life the apparent right to represent the root, whole, or essence of Russian culture. Articulations of Russianness positioned outside of the Russian Federation, with Nastavshev in Riga, are no less primary or legitimate than those produced in Moscow or Tver. And in the age of frenetic circulation of cultural goods across political borders in container vessels and via electronic circuits, each of these articulations is equally 'global,' just as none may lay claim to

[4] Platt (2019: 6).

[5] Rubins (2019: 46).

a singular propriety or unity. Like any other vision of Russian or Russophone culture, generated anywhere else, Nastavshev's production of Russianness, lifting off from Riga, is one version of global Russianness and a fragment only of an ideologically generated, non-existent whole.

Yet if this local, yet deterritorialized conception of culture perhaps grants purchase on Nastavshev's significance in the global arena – and in Moscow, as well – additional work is required to explain the position he and other cultural figures like him occupy in Riga's youthful and cool cultural scene – the questions with which I began. If political or linguistically defined national cultural wholes are ideological chimeras, they are powerful ones, enhanced by economic and political hierarchies – real forces to be contended with, rather than simply dismissed. And this is especially true of the imaginary whole of Russian culture in Riga, which, buttressed by Moscow money and local post-Soviet economic disparities and malaise, holds many in its thrall. In the essay that follows, I will treat in detail neither Nastavshev nor Nikto, but rather the Russian-language poetry and multimedia art collective Orbita ("Orbit" in both Latvian and Russian), which occupies the same local cultural terrain and has similar global positioning to that of Nastavshev. In fact, the latter created a 2019 musical production based on Orbita's poetry for Riga's Russian Drama Theater entitled "Five Songs from Memory" ("Piat' pesen po pamiati", 2019). We might note as well that Orbita's members have collaborated with Nikto. These intersections reflect the intimate scale of the cool cultural scene in Riga, a compact city of only one and a half million people, but also Orbita's central positioning in the Latvian cultural milieu in general. Everyone seems to know everyone else here, whether we are talking about the Riga Biennale, progressive cultural festivals, the trendy club scene, the most fashionable restaurants, or a poetry performance. And everyone knows Orbita, the award-winning performances, art installations, and other cultural endeavors of which are characterized by the same striking positioning of Russian language at the center of a largely Latvian-speaking, cool and fashionable scene as with Nikto or Nastavshev.

Orbita's position in Latvian society results from the group's highly intentional intervention into cultural life, supported by carefully considered techniques for incorporating Russian language poetry in the local landscape. In the poem offered as epigraph to this chapter, by Orbita member Artur Punte, a commuter carpool presents an allegory for life in Riga. This is a space where Russian-speakers and Latvian-speakers are thrown together in quotidian proximity, and where a discussion of computer platforms can veer off unexpectedly into uncomfortable matters of ethnic distinction: "'...By the way, how do Russians... I mean...' he wants to ask something/ about the peculiarities of PCs, but mixes up computers with my nationality and breaks off...." The result can be an uncomfortable silence, one that even a student's joke at someone else's expense cannot defuse: "'Or when you yourself say "Gypsy," / there's no terminological neutrality, you know? And with Chukchis, forget about it...' He stops, expecting

we'll laugh..." No one laughs. Yet perhaps this is only within the fictive, allegorical space of the jeep, whose characters are impossible to "cheer up," it seems. For the reader, the lame, offensive attempt at a joke and embarrassed silence enables critical, ironic distance – meta-humor at the conversation's sitcom absurdism and the student's attempt to deflect the discriminatory gaze on other, common targets of racial othering. Punte has shifted the Latvian social situation into the heart of a poetic project, taking communication in more than one language, accented speech, and intercultural translation head on, yet also at a critical and aesthetic distance. Translation between languages, cultures, and histories – its impossibility, yet perhaps also its necessity – is placed at center stage.

As I explain in the present article, translation, its successes and failures, rendered as a high-stakes performance in its own right, is key to the Orbita project. This is "performative translation" – a term that I define more precisely below – through which cultural activity is enacted as balanced on the divide, sometimes sharp and sometimes blurred, between competing languages and national cultures. Rather than shaping Russophone cultural space in Riga as an alternative zone in opposition to a Latvian-language cultural competitor, a contest of two imaginary unities, Orbita has sought to fold Russian-language culture like egg whites into the batter of Latvian society – or to pour it into the honeycomb of its structures – a prestidigitation before the audience's very eyes. This embrace of translation as an integral mode of poetic production understandably evokes anxious critique from defenders of the ineffable, organic authenticity of great literature, and especially of poetry, which is so often equated with the untranslatability of the original work of national genius (one recalls a century of discussions of the impossibility of translating Aleksandr Pushkin's "Evgenii Onegin" [Eugene Onegin]). Sergej Timofejev, a member of the Orbita group, once told me how a Russian author at a poetry festival had accused him of betraying the traditional poetic forms of the Russian poetic canon by "writing in free verse in the interest of translation." Yet this accusation gets most things wrong. Speaking as a translator, I can attest that Orbita poems are no easier or harder to translate than any others. Often, as in the Punte poem above, they dramatize translation and untranslatability. At times, as we will see below, they are themselves resolutely untranslatable, if what we mean by this is a text that resists any semblance of 'complete' or easy passage into another language. Orbita's focus on translation accesses the problematic that Emily Apter has treated at length of "untranslatables" – often sites not of organic, ineffable linguistic and cultural meanings, but rather the emanations of "languages in paradoxically shared zones of nonnational belonging at the edge of mutual unintelligibility"[6] – contact zones such as present-day Latvia. By making the performance of translation in such a space central to their cultural project – both centering the text on translation and

[6] Apter (2010: 50-63), cit. on page 61. See also the same author's "Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability" (Apter 2013).

mistranslation, and centering translation practices in the performance space – Orbita shifts the meaning of translation itself as it relates to place. Rather than being a vehicle for texts to travel, to break free of linguistic, national and geographical fixity, translation becomes a way of localizing language and texts in a polyglot city of fraught interlinguistic encounters. And when the work of art is itself the performance of translation from Russian into Latvian, how may one "translate" this performance into a third or fourth language? The task of the translator either becomes existentially impossible, or regresses toward the conclusion that further translation is simply a continuation of the performance.

In practice, the latter is the case, for Orbita's performative translation practices project both locally and globally. As with Nastavshev, Orbita's *sui generis* positioning in the Riga cultural landscape has been the foundation for a cosmopolitan profile and the launchpad for critical success in Europe, Russia, and across the globe. As with Nastavshev, this combination of intent situatedness and global relevance, between local and "world literature," is only a seeming contradiction. As Rebecca Walkowitz has explained in her study of "born-translated" fiction, contemporary global literary circulation encompasses not only seemingly language-independent works of popular fiction, published simultaneously in multiple world languages by transnational publishing conglomerates, but also works that turn untranslatability itself into a license to translate, and that make their actual situatedness in a polylingual world the foundation for a competing form of global literary culture:

> If we approach untranslatability as the dramatization of translation, then the most untranslatable texts become those that find ways to keep translation from stopping. They are those that invite translation rather than prohibit it. […] [B]orn-translated fiction, because it emphasizes ongoing production and multilingual reception, interferes with the novel's traditional role as an instrument of monolingual collectivity.[7]

In Moscow, Tbilisi, Philadelphia, or Berlin, Orbita's work rises into supernational prominence precisely as a result of its balancing act across local linguistic and cultural borders, which drives the creation of innovative texts, performance practices, and cultural politics. Like the novels Walkowitz studies, both in Latvia and abroad, Orbita's project intervenes in familiar conceptions of world literature as an arena of transparent translations, placeless texts, and easy border-crossings and reconfigures the interface between national and cosmopolitan cultural life.

II. Performative Translation

The Orbita group was founded in 1999 by five Russian-language poets and multimedia artists from Riga: Semyon [Semen] Khanin, Punte, Vladimir Svetlov, Timofejev, and Georges [Zhorzh] Uallik (the last of whom, within a few years,

[7] Walkowitz (2015: 44-46).

became a more or less inactive member). Over the twenty-plus years of its existence, the activities of the group have progressively risen up from a foundation primarily in poetry to include video poetry, multimedia art installations, an annual almanac, a press –which publishes Orbita's own literary and critical writing and photography, as well as work by others – organization of festivals and recurring event series, participation in public art initiatives such as the Cēsis Art Festival and the Riga Biennale, and many other undertakings.[8] The group's performance activities, which are treated in detail below, involve collaboration with a network of other Latvian and Russian poets, artists, musicians and institutions, including not only Nastavshev and the Theater of Russian Drama but also the Latvian National Opera, the Latvian National Museum of Art, and Latvia's most successful rock group Prāta Vētra (Brain Storm). The red thread that runs through all of this activity is translation: Orbita poetry almost never appears in Latvia in any form, published or performed, without a Latvian translation; outside of Latvia, the group's work has been translated into multiple other languages and the members of Orbita are themselves active as translators. Orbita's reputation and recognitions have grown over the years: it has received numerous awards within Latvia for writing, book design and installation art; its poetry has been published in journals and as separate books in multiple European languages and in English in both the USA and the UK; and its members' books have been published by the prestigious New Literary Observer Publishing House in the Russian Federation, where the group has also received accolades including the Sergey Kuryokhin Contemporary Art Award, the short-list for Russia's most prestigious non-state literary award, the Andrey Bely Prize, and others. Like Nastavshev, then, this is local Russophone Latvian culture gone global.

Orbita's activities are a concerted effort to deploy Russophone culture on the Latvian scene without reasserting the language of the occupier or reconstructing the official cultural geography of the Soviet era. Towards the end of the first decade of the new century, when I first met the members of the group and asked about their vision for Russophone culture in Latvia, they replied in a deadpan – even making a show of the extent to which they considered the question to be banal – that things Russian should be a normalized and unremarkable component of an independent, multilinguistic Latvian society. In short, Orbita was from the start a social-political project. Yet the poets don't necessarily want to talk about it – at least not in direct terms. This project could not be called utopian, given that the group viewed a culturally and linguistically hybrid future as an actual possibility. Yet it must also be said that this vision was and is not widely shared. It is deeply foreign both to those who seek a "Latvia for Latvians" and to Russian-speakers who continue to mourn the past dominance of Russian language and culture – in other words, to all those who view language, culture and

[8] For an earlier account of the Orbita group and its practices, from which this analysis has benefitted, see: Kukulin (2002: 262-282).

territory in national or imperial terms. And contrary to the group's hopes at its founding and its insistence in that conversation over a decade ago, Russian language and culture has in more recent years been brought more and more to heel and down to ground in the Russian Federation, regional geopolitics has been increasingly polarized across the Europe-Russia border, reaching a fever pitch of conflict in 2022, and Latvian society has remained fractured along ethnic lines. Nevertheless, Orbita continues to create Russian-language poetry as Latvian poetry in Riga and to project this Russian-Latvian poetry into other languages and around the world. Orbita's pragmatic, yet improbable, localized, yet deterritorialized and global project calls for a new understanding of poetry's location in geography.

So how does Orbita accomplish this feat? One approach to Russophone poetry that evades identification with Soviet retro and the hegemony of national and imperial conceptions of culture and territory would be the overt hybridization of cultural traditions, evocations of space, and even language in order to loosen and complicate the ties of Russian culture on political territory. As a point of comparison, one might mention Sergei Zavyalov's 1997-1998 work "Birchbark inscriptions of the Mordvin-Erzya and the Mordvin-Moksha" ("Moksherzian' kir'govon' grammatat / berestianye gramoty mordvy-erzi i mortvy-mokshi"), that incorporates stanzas in the Mordvinic languages, but also carries out a decentering of Russian, which is "grammatically and semantically deformed, seemingly by the concealed, half-forgotten presence of other languages at some deeper level," in Ilya Kukulin's assessment.[9] In style and subject matter, the poetry of Orbita might be said to do something similar, but in a less overt manner. For one thing, the group's poems and projects are often expressly concerned with the geography of Riga and its environs, as in a 2018 poem by Khanin:

> you fear and anticipate, when will it come –
> that day, when you will at last understand
> that the world stands not on the backs of elephants and whales
> but of nervous little hamsters
>
> and you'll find out that babylon
> is located in the vērmanes garden
> where maidens lay on cardboard pedestals
> in elaborate wigs portraying lions […]
>
> and the vases on the opera house façade
> will fill up with southern fruits, still warm
> and beavers will perceive in their own tails
> māris liepa's splayed foot
>
> and the waters of the daugava will turn turquoise
> for the edification of their numberless tributaries
> and heads on the french embassy will turn
> to see smoke belching from the opera house smokestack […]

[9] Kukulin (2019: 151-182), cit. on page 76; Kukulin (2012: 846-909).

and the stars will rise out of freedom's hands
and from the chasms a sunny drizzle will pour
and you and I will lie together on the lawn beneath the gingko
and try to lie completely still[10]

и боишься, и ждешь, когда он наступит
тот день, когда ты окончательно поймешь
что мир держится не на слонах и китах
а на маленьких беспокойных хомячках

и ты узнаешь, что вавилон
располагается в верманском парке
где девы лежат на картонных возвышениях
в пышных париках изображают львов […]

и наполнятся вазы на фасаде оперы
теплыми еще плодами юга
и прозреют бобры в своих хвостах
расплющенную ногу мариса лиепы

и воды в даугаве станут бирюзовыми
в назидание своим многочисленным притокам
и повернутся головы на французском посольстве
посмотреть как из оперной трубы валит черный дым […]

и взойдут звезды из рук свободы
и из хлябей хлынет грибной дождик
и мы ляжем с тобой на газон под гинкго
и попробуем лежать совсем неподвижно[11]

Here, an absurdist apocalyptic end-time plays out in the urban topography of Riga via a fantasy of the sudden animation of sculptures in central Riga parks and on well-known façades – from the "splayed foot" of the monument to the Soviet Latvian ballet star Māris Liepa near the Riga Opera House to the three stars atop the Monument to Freedom. Local knowledge is taken to the extreme of an inside joke, emphatically locating this poem in Riga and addressing its residents. In parallel, global, historic and mythical elsewheres ("babylon," "southern fruits," the French embassy) are mapped onto this urban space, seemingly reconfiguring the entire cosmos, balanced on the backs of folkloric "elephants and whales" into a smaller local version, atop "nervous little hampsters."

Yet Khanin's poem stops far short of any linguistic hybridization like Zavyalov's. The primary mode by which Latvian words enter into this poem, and into Orbita poetry as a whole, is as Latvian proper nouns and toponyms. In a few instances across the total corpus of Orbita poetry, this results in interlinguistic wordplay, as for instance in the Svetlov poem titled «на aveņu авеню» ("on aveņu avenue") – "aveņu" means "raspberry" in Latvian (the street in question is Svetlov's invention). One might also propose that the Orbita tendency towards

[10] Khanin (2018a: 98).

[11] Khanin (2018b: 24).

free verse, at times stanzaic and rhythmic, as in Khanin's poem, and at times in the form of prose poems, resonates with the Latvian poetic tradition, in which such a formal approach has long been normalized, in distinction from the more formally conservative Russian tradition. Yet this aspect of Orbita writing also affiliates it with the leading edge of poetry in the Russian Federation, which since the end of the 1980s has been moving more and more emphatically away from rhymed and metered poetry. Squaring this circle yet again, one might observe that the urbanity and restraint of Orbita's gestures towards a Latvian localization of its poetry itself resonates with cutting-edge Latvian artistic and literary traditions, which gravitate towards inventive, yet also understated and tasteful interventions, rather than shock or épatage. This "Baltic style" is evident, too, in the operations of Orbita itself – what other group of Russian language poets has a tidy, centrally located office, sparsely furnished with modernist furniture? In sum, Orbita's writing, in the context of the Russian poetic universe as a whole, remains thoroughly recognizable as Russian poetry, merely evincing an air of the extraterritorial – a touch of Latvian style – in restrained, cool Latvian manner.

A different, more direct strategy to detach poetry in Russian from the dominant tradition and political space of the Russian Federation would be to produce work that overtly rejects such a position, along with the current imperialism of the Russian Federation. One might consider, for example, poems by the Odesa poet Boris Khersonskii that ironically deflate the Russian right to lay claim to all things Russian – a 2014 poem, for instance, in which he responded to accusations of "Russophobia" evoked by his outspoken pro-Ukrainian positions with the sarcastic admission "Do I hate everything Russian? I do, especially this/ little birch tree, this lake, and this little church…" ("Nenavizhu vse russkoe? Da, osobenno etu/ berezku i eto ozero, i tserkvushku…").[12] Or, closer to the matter at hand, one might mention poems like "It's easy to hate Russia from Latvia..." ("Udobno nenavidet' Rossiiu iz Latvii…"), by Dmitry Kuz'min – an expatriate from the Russian Federation, recently arrived in Latvia. Kuz'min's poem clearly, to say the least, signals his antipathy to any form of Russian culture that might be associated with the Russian state and its projects in the Near Abroad. In the Russian Federation, too, since the turn of the millennium, Russian experimental poetry has more and more tended to fuse the legacies of late Soviet nonconformist conceptualist and postmodern writing with overt political agendas – as in the case of poets associated with the neo-Marxist "Chto delat'" group, Aleksandr Skidan, Dina Gatina, Roman Osminkin, Keti Chukhrov, Kirill Medvedev, Pavel Arseniev, feminist poets like Galina Rymbu, Oksana Vasyakina, Lolita Aga-

[12] The poem was first published on Khersonskii's Livejournal site on December 4, 2014 (Khersonskii 2014), it was later included in the author's print publications. It is discussed and translated in: Uffelman (2019: 207-229), cit. on page 225.

malova, many associated with the F-Letter group, and others.[13] Yet it must be observed that poetry that explicitly takes up the political in opposition to Kremlin policies and the hegemony of Russian national patriotic culture, within and without the Russian Federation, also implicitly recognizes the inscription of cultural life in a geography dominated by political institutions and subdivided into "proper" national territories. These are alternative Russian or Russophone cultures that define their position in opposition to the reality of the Russian state, its official patriotism and its patrolled borders.

This has not, in general, been the approach of Orbita. Certainly, from time to time, overt political expression surfaces in the group's poetry, as in a 2002 poem by Punte "Final Remarks: Several Reasons for My Loss of Hearing" ("Naposledok: Neskol'ko prichin, po kotorym ia poterial slukh"), in which he describes how "foreign ranks, departing from my city" marched with an awful "precision and uniformity," seemingly echoing the formal features of traditional Russian poetry that Punte rejects: "all that Russian literature stomped out… and smashed my hearing completely!" ("vsia eta russkaia literatura i ottoptala… i sbila mne slukh naproch!"). In more recent years, Timofejev has authored poems with a whiff of topical political resonance, such as "Her Oil" ("Ee neft'," 2017), which allegorizes Russia, fantastically, as a woman who continuously excretes oil – "Oil is her daily routine / […] In this life of ours / She has oil. What have you got?" ("Neft' – eto ee povsedvevnost'/ […] U nee v etoi zhizni / Est' neft'. A chto est' u vas?"). Yet even in these relatively few instances, the political remains an understated background matrix: this is not explicit civic poetry, as in the case of Khersonskii or Kuz'min. As in Punte's poem cited at the start of this chapter, the Orbita poets generally toggle between the meta-political and the pragmatic, passing over the declarative, and dwelling in the performative. In the main, Orbita's members evince an autonomy-aesthetic model of poetry that precludes overt political engagement – perhaps in a reflection of regional poetry's general turn away from the political in the decade after the fall of state socialism, during which the Orbita poets all began to publish. The sublation of explicit politics by performative politics was evident in a recent conversation in which Timofejev recalled the Orbita poets' determination, at the moment of the group's founding, "not to demand that Russian culture should be a part of Latvian culture, but simply to act as though this were already the norm." We may note in this regard that, remarkably, for an art collective that has persisted for over twenty years and created a recognizable brand and style of poetic production, Orbita has no articulated program and has never produced a single manifesto (even a purely aesthetic one).

Instead of linguistic or cultural hybridity or explicit political declarations, Orbita has developed a distinct, highly original strategy to emancipate Russo-

[13] For critical accounts of some of these figures, see: Bozovic (2019: 453-478); Platt (2017: 278-291); Sandler (2017: 281-313).

phone poetry in Latvia from post-socialist, post-imperialist frames: that of "performative translation." This is an ever-expanding repertoire of devices that bring the Russian and Latvian languages together, foregrounding translation, and contesting the political domination of cultural spacetime at its root. In so doing, Orbita also challenges common conceptions of translation associated with national literary projects. Commonly, translation is judged on its transparency and invisibility – against the ideal of a perfect, somehow unmediated transfer of the original into "another language," in which the translator and the act of translation themselves fade from view, while the national unity of the languages in question is enforced. With Orbita, in contrast, translation is demonstratively, visibly, palpably enacted as a performance in its own right. Orbita's audience is never allowed to forget that the poem exists in another language, and further, never allowed to lose sight of the act of translation itself. To borrow a concept from Apter, this is literature in the "translation zone," that shifts our imaginary of language from "discrete languages contained within perimeters of standardized usage" to "plurilingual process […] languages in translation, pidgins, creoles, idiomatic sampling, loan-words, calques, code-switching."[14] As I remark above, Orbita's project has never been a utopian one. Its intent construction of a translation zone as social actuality is, however, captured well by the term "heterotopia," described by Michel Foucault as a "counter-site" or "a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted." The heterotopia is "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible," and can "create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory."[15] We may note, regarding Orbita's focus on performance, in the literal sense, as well as on installation art, that the theater and the museum are among Foucault's leading examples for this concept. "Performative translation" is the foundational practice and structuring principle of Orbita's heterotopian project.

III. Translation, Performed

In Orbita's practices, translation may be understood both in the literal sense, and in a series of conceptual-allegorical extensions. All publications of the Orbita press are bilingual (and sometimes trilingual). This includes Russian-Latvian editions of poetry originally written in Russian – this is the format in which the Orbita poets publish their own work – but also similar editions of poetry written in Latvian, as well as essay collections, photography and art albums, and other works. Their publishing undertakings include many translation projects from

[14] Apter (2013: 100).

[15] Foucault (1986: 22-27), cit. on pages 24-27.

Russian into Latvian and vice versa, as well as para-translation projects – a historical anthology of Russian-language literature written by Latvians, for instance.[16] The group's performances, too, always incorporate Latvian translations, either in the form of bilingual readings with Latvian translators, or (more commonly) group appearances in which Latvian translations are projected during a live reading. Yet translation is also allegorized in various multimedia dimensions of these performances that dramatize the passage of art from one medium to another – a live musical accompaniment, a series of projected photographs, or more complex and intricate forms of technical and electronic "translation" that I address below. Through its persistent public performance of interlinguistic, intercultural, and intermedial translation over more than two decades, Orbita has assembled within Latvia a bilingual penumbra of poets, collaborators, translators, and fans – a bridge between language communities that are typically distinct. Beyond Latvia, the group has established itself at the forefront of multilingual and multimedia poetic performance. At base, there is nothing tricky about Orbita's orientation on translation. In defiance of standard, national mappings of Russian and Latvian language and culture as incompatible – divided into opposed social scenes and sometimes political parties within Latvian society, held apart by patrolled borders without – Orbita centers culture on translation. This is translational culture, or culture as translation: a fusion of Russian and Latvian in which the line of demarcation is everywhere or nowhere.

Yet while the principle itself isn't tricky, Orbita's conceptual riffing on the possibilities of performative translation is intricate. Before considering Orbita performances, in the literal sense, we may discuss the enactment of multilingual social ideals in Orbita's books, considered as crafted objects. These are no simple facing-page bilingual editions. Each book embodies in a creative manner the typographical and physical possibilities for presentation of parallel texts in two languages. Consider, for instance, an edition of Khanin's poetry in which the Russian texts and their Latvian translations are printed in identical volumes, held together back-to-back by invisible magnets embedded in the binding.

[16] Zapol' (2011).

Fig. 1. Semyon Khanin [Semen Khanin], "Vplav'" / "Peldus" (Riga: Orbita, 2013). Two volumes (or one "split" volume?) of poetry – in Russian and in Latvian translation, that snap together via magnets concealed in the binding. Photo: Vladimir Svetlov

The magnets present a lucid and beautiful allegory of inter-linguistic social ties – their invisibility, material reality, flexibility, and strength, combined with fragility and potential impermanence. The edition attests to the linkages between Latvian and Russian, yet also conjures the specter of those bonds' dissolution – the two volumes might be separated, one could be lost, or they could wind up on opposite sides of a national border… (and in practice, they have a tendency to get detached from one another in the bookstore, causing headaches). Or take a collection of Uallik's poetry that opens in the two languages from opposite sides, and which incorporates paired photographic illustrations in the two halves of the book that represent the same object from opposite perspectives. It's as though one were peering through alternate windows into the world of the book from opposite sides of a single space, offering a different material allegory of the bilingual mapping of a shared human reality.

Fig. 2. Georges [Zhorzh] Uallik, "Vizhu slyshy molchu" / "Redzu dzirdu klusēju" (Riga: Orbita, 2013). One volume that opens from two sides, in Russian and Latvian translation, with coordinated photo-illustrations of objects from two sides. Photo: Vladimir Svetlov

Another example: a 2009 collection of translations of Latvian poetry into Russian, titled *Par mums/ Za nas*, which literally calls its readers to perform multilingual social life, offering parallel texts printed in facing page, but reversed top to bottom, making it possible for two readers to take in the original and the translation simultaneously, sitting on opposite sides of the book, laid out on a table. With these and other typographical inventions, Orbita makes bilingualism into a structural feature of bookmaking, centering the reader's attention on translation and allegorically performing a variety of critical interventions into its social and literary implications. Each book is a heterotopia in miniature, nested within the Orbita project as a whole.

Orbita was a pioneer in the creation of video poetry in Russian literary space. These are short films incorporating performance of a poem – in the most aesthetically successful examples adding a novel layer of artistic complexity, rather than merely a string of "illustrations" to the text. The poem offered as an epigraph to this Chapter, "I know – the only thing that cheers up the gang from Tallinas St…," was the basis for one such video poem, a collaboration between

Punte and the composer Linda Leimane that was recognized with a first prize at the 2013 Fifth Leg Festival of video poetry in Moscow. The video divides the screen between two standard-aspect frames, leaving a generous band of black at the top and bottom of the screen. On the left, in a number of leisurely, mostly hand-held, yet stable shots of cars and figures, alternating between deep and shallow focus, we see Punte emerge onto a busy street that we guess or recognize to be Tallinas iela. On the right, Leimane approaches the keyboard of an open grand piano with various small objects positioned in and on the strings.

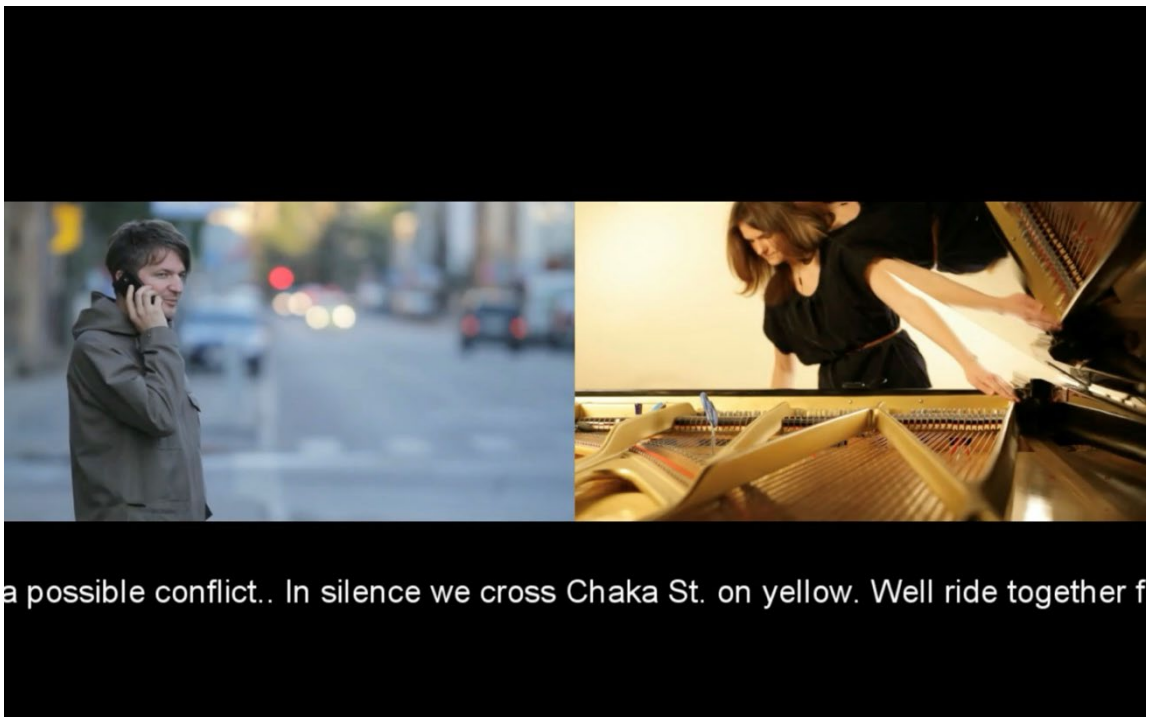

Fig. 3. Still from Artūrs [Artur] Punte, Linda Leimane, et al., Tallinas Street: Videopoem (Riga: Orbita, 2012).

Punte takes out a cell phone and places a call; Leimane's phone rings and she answers the call. Without preamble, Punte slowly begins narrating his observations in Latvian: "A car pulls out of a parking lot and turns right. A pedestrian from the right. A car from the left. A car from the right" ("Mašīna izbrauc no stāvvietas un iet pa labi. Gājējs labajā pusē. Mašīna kreisais. Mašīna labais"). Leimane responds by playing notes on the piano, plucking its strings, sounding them against the objects, in a meditative series of slowly moving handheld shots that show the musician, her instrument, and her reflection on its polished wood. Punte's voice and Leimane's performance are distributed over the left and right channels to match the split screen. A minute and forty seconds into the video's four minutes and twenty seconds, Punte's voice appears again as an overdub, reciting the poem in Russian at a slow pace, as his telephoned observations and Leimane's music grow quieter in the background, although they never fade en-

tirely away. The video poem exists in several versions, with Latvian subtitles, Russian subtitles, or English subtitles, as the case may be, moving in ticker-tape fashion in the black below the frames.

Building on the reading offered above of the poem as engineering aesthetic and critical distance out of the sitcom of linguistic and cultural miscues and misprisions that it recounts, we may observe that the video poem deploys transmediality as an allegory of interlinguistic translatability, as the poet transposes his vision into an account in Latvian, passed through the telephone, eliciting Leimane's response in musical form, while the Russian poem is matched by translations into music and image, but also into other languages in the subtitles. Two screens, two (or three) languages, and multiple media and mediations are orchestrated into an aesthetic harmony that throws into relief the crossed wires of the commuters' conversation. Here, the heterotopia of Orbita's performative translation answers the heterodystopia, to venture a Foucaultean neologism, inside the Jeep, reaffirming the poem's creation of an aesthetic unity of language communities out of the raw materials of social life on the Riga streets.

The same principle is at work in many of the group's museum installations, often with a heightened interactive element allowing the members of a multilingual audience to choose their preferred language. At the 2016 Cēsis Art Festival, visitors to the "Actual Spacescape" installation found a console in the center of a darkened, otherwise vacant gallery room, similar to one you might find on entry to a European post-office or bank, including a touchscreen and a ticket printer. At the click of a button, visitors received printouts of transmissions, purportedly from a lost, unmanned space exploration vehicle, in four languages: Russian, Latvian, the nearly vanished Liv language, and English.

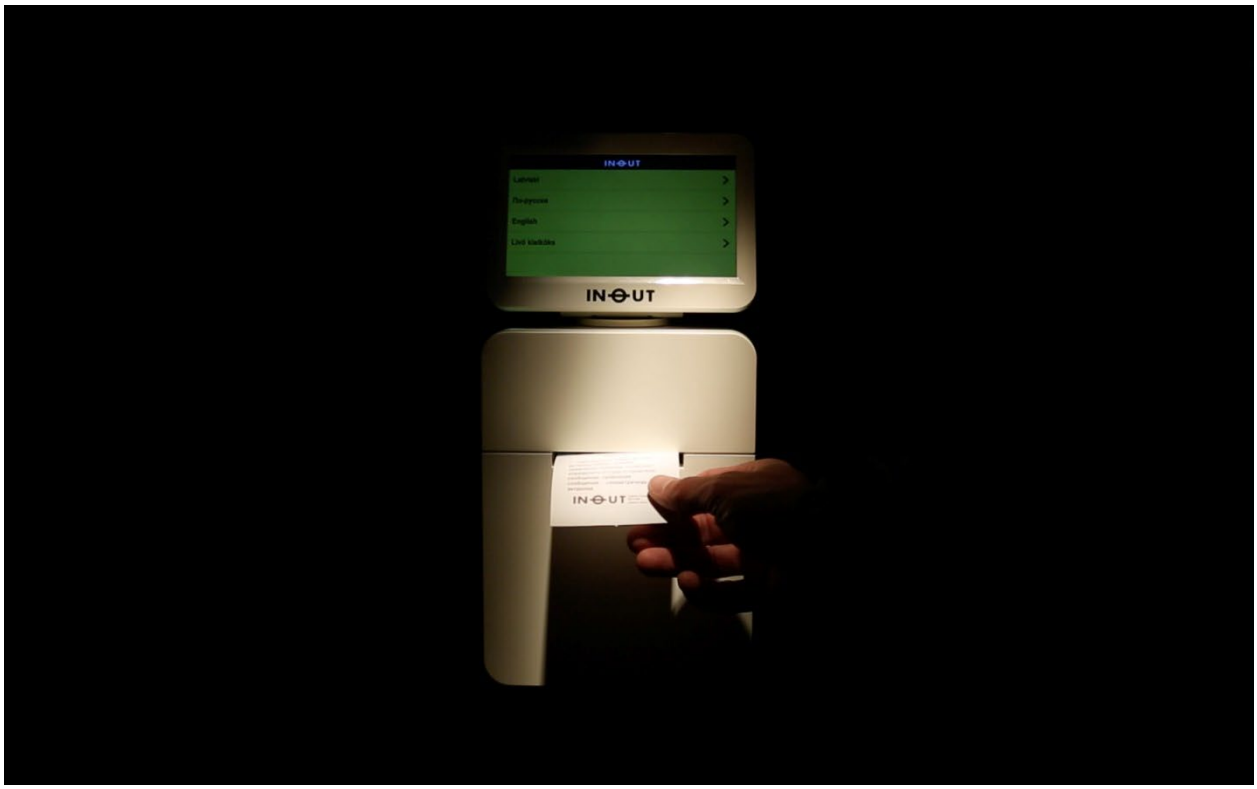

Fig. 4. Orbita, "Actual Spacescape," 2016 Cēsis Art Festival, Cēsis, Latvia. By pressing the buttons on the console, visitors could receive transmissions purportedly from a lost, unmanned space exploration vehicle, in four languages: Russian, Latvian, the nearly vanished Liv language, and English. Photo: Vladimir Svetlov.

Other projects call spectators to enact a multilinguistic form of social subjectivity, as with an event that invited spectators to put on flip-flops engineered to print the group's Russian-language poetry and Latvian translations, alternating the languages with the left and right feet. Among the group's most celebrated, prize-winning installations is the "Radio Wall": a wall festooned with some fifty transistor radios, old and new, tuned variously to local radio stations in diverse languages, to ambient music, but primarily to poetry recitations in various languages, broadcast by means of a localized FM broadcasting unit. Visitors can walk along the wall, stopping to listen to the languages they understand – to the poems and other transmissions that speak to them – or to admire models their parents had on the kitchen table in the 1970s and 1980s.

Radio has been something of an idée fixe for Orbita, in part, one suspects, in a reflection of Timofejev's background in music – he worked at one time as a DJ. A 2014 project involved a pirate FM station the group set up in the center of Riga, dubbed Marx FM, which broadcast poetry in Latvian, Russian and English without pause until it was pinpointed by the authorities and shut down, resulting in a fine for the group. Yet the most salient use of radio by the group was in a performance format that the group employed from about 2010 to 2019, called the FM Slow Show, which fully realized Orbita's mode of performative transla-

tion, and which I have treated more extensively elsewhere. This is a collaborative performance in which the poets alternate reciting their poetry, which is broadcast using the same local broadcasting technology used in the Radio Wall to one of tens of radios arrayed on a table on the stage.

Fig. 5. Orbita performing the FM Slow Show, CYCLOP Video Poetry Festival, Kiev, Ukraine, 2012. Photo: Polina Horodyska.

The rest of the poets manipulate the radios, providing a background of ambient sound including white noise and also fragments of local broadcasts in Latvian, Russian, or whatever the local languages are where the poets are performing. The background noise dies to a murmur when a poet reads, but rises in volume between poems. Often, a musical accompaniment is provided by one of the musicians with whom the group collaborates. Meanwhile, translations of the poetry into the language(s) of the audience appear projected on a screen behind the poets. Here, translation is front and center as the very stuff of performance. One recalls that the Russian and Latvian words for broadcast, "transliatsiia" and "translācija," are etymologically linked in obvious fashion with the English word "translation." One also recalls that radio has a significant history, in the border zone between Europe and Russia, where it once delivered BBC, Radio Free Europe, and VOA to Soviet citizens who were attuned to what many called "the voices." But FM radio is far from obsolesced in Riga, where, among other

things, it until recently delivered Russian media, that more and more seems as much of a world away as VOA was in the USSR, often via syndicated broadcasts from Moscow or St. Petersburg. In the Radio Wall and the FM Slow Show *translācija / transliatsiia* of the poetic voice acts as a technological allegory articulating a multidimensional heterotopic translation zone. Here, translation across borders, spaces, languages, and media becomes, far from being invisible, the very content of a performance that bursts the boundaries of national languages and their discrete geographies and demonstrates the necessity of mediation in any aesthetic or communicative activity.

Let me be more precise in interpretation of this allegory. Orbita's ability to create and occupy a multilinguistic Latvian heterotopia derives from the poets' stance of distance from the patriotic politics of the autarchic Russian cultural whole – and their distance, therefore, from the mainstream of Russophone cultural life in Latvia that is in its thrall. By centering the audience's gaze on translation, rather than the "center" of the national linguistic and cultural tradition, Orbita breaks the literary free from nationally defined space. Yet strikingly, this is an apt strategy for literary success across all borders, including the Russian one (at least, until 2022). With regard to their success on the experimental literary scene in Russian Federation, one might recall Pascale Casanova's demonstrations of the hegemonic power of nationally organized literary centers, which themselves are interrelated in a system of unequal trans-national competition.[17] The Orbita poets, while 100% Latvian, are, after all, also still Russian-language poets, and their work has gained recognition via the dominant mechanisms of prestige of the Russian literary system. Yet the motivation for recognition in Moscow, in this case, stands in tension with the centripetal logic of Casanova's analysis: Khanin, Punte, Timofejev, and Svetlov have had significance at the geographical centers of Russian cultural life in large part *because* of the innovative practices driven by their location on the borders between languages – because of their poetics of performative translation, because of their heterotopic constructions. This search to discover new literary potentials at the juncture between languages is not in itself new – in some ways it is comparable to the episodes in earlier European modernist writing described by Barry McCrea, in which writers turned to the margins of metropolitan cultural life, seeking to discover alternative potentials in the disappearing minor languages of the continent. Yet in the case of Orbita, the orientation is not on Latvian language as a defamiliarizing force in Russian letters, but on the language encounter of translation itself as a means to deterritorialize Russian as a metropolitan literary language –

[17] Casanova (2004).

or perhaps we should say, as a means to embrace the status of Russian in Latvia and Europe as a minor language (as the language of a de facto minority).[18]

This strategy for the creation of avant-garde innovation out of linguistic experimentation at the margins; these books, inventive and beautiful permutations of the typographical possibilities for combining two languages in one printed object; these performances, elegant meditations on distance and nearness; and this poetry, that derives from Latvian and Russian traditions and collaborations – all of these balancing acts in the cultural intertidal zones drive the avant-garde practice that makes these poets significant in Russian experimental literary life, which is as hungry for the deterritorialization of culture as are the Orbita poets. In sum, then, for these poets, the cultural geography of deterritorialized Russian-language literature of the Near Abroad reflects in inverted form that of the metropolitan centers of Russian literary life during the first two decades of the century (that itself seemed more and more to be an island of "internal emigration"), where a cosmopolitan and experimental avant-garde balanced against a politically legitimated, territorially centered and bounded mainstream. In the Russian literary life of Latvia, insofar as it coincides with the institutional and cultural centers of Latvian society per se, performative translation occupies cultural and social center stage because it stands at a distance from canonical Russian cultural traditions, as well as from the cultural politics of any in Latvia who mourn the absence of those traditions, and, too, from any in Latvia who seek a nation-state that is a simple reflection of the national exclusions generated in the era of Russian and Soviet imperial domination. The Orbita poets enter into global circulation directly from the deterritorialized heterotopia of the translation zone.

In conclusion, we must note that performative translation, like any performance, is a dynamic process that responds to changing circumstances, to the shifting nature of audiences and ever new enactments. The practices of the Orbita poets continue to evolve into new forms, expressing this dynamism, but also the consistency of their creative principles. In 2020, the Latvian National Art Museum acquired the Orbita's Radio Wall installation for its permanent collection. Given that this same set of radios was the basis for the FM Slow Show, the latter performance has been retired, or at least put on pause. In the meantime, Orbita has created a new performance, entitled Motopoiesis. This is an audio-visual spectacle, in which the poets' recitations pass through a highly complex transformation on their path from the microphone to amplification. On stage, the poets stand grouped around and manipulate an array of electronics and multiple mechanical devices – baffles, wheels, small balls in tracks, pendulums.

[18] Any comparison between the cases that McCrea examines and that of the Orbita group demands a great deal of care. Latvian is not a "disappearing" minor language – rather, it is vanishing from the imperial matrix of Russian cultural hegemony (McCrea 2015).

Fig. 6. Orbita performing Motopoesis, Riga, Latvia, 2019. Photo: Kevin M. F. Platt

The appearance of this apparatus is halfway between that of an experimental DIY synthesizer and a pinball machine. As one poet recites a poem, the signal from his microphone is converted into the motion of one or another object via magnets and motors. The resulting sounds and noise are themselves picked up by microphone and combined with again with the poet's voice before being broadcast to the audience in amplified form. Meanwhile, the poem, in English and Latvian translation, along with closeup video of the Motopoiesis apparatus are projected behind the poets. In sum, this is a "translation" of poetry into electronic signal, then into mechanical motion, into more sound, into images, and finally into a new electronic signal, reiterating in new form Orbita's heterotopic avant-garde poetic imagination. The effect is astounding.

Yet the environment for such performances also continues to shift and evolve. Orbita's performative translation practices map out a cardinally different place for language and culture in geography from those operative in contemporary nation states and in current global regimes of monolingualism and "world literature." Here, language and culture become both intensively localized and intently global, both fixed to the concrete multilingual cultural community of Riga and deterritorialized – detatched from the political and geographical frames that usually assign language use to a privileged community of "native speakers" and a historically defined territory or homeland. Such paradigms are especially strong

in Latvia, a post-Soviet post-colony in which current and recently intensified political and geopolitical realities insistently enforce a regime of singular nationally defined languages locked in competition. In response, Orbita's activities exemplify what Yasemin Yildiz describes as "postmonolingual" aesthetic work. These are not multilingual cultural projects, but rather ones that "configure languages in ways that imagine new formations, subjects, and modes of belonging […], offer a more critical way of dealing with the monolingual paradigm […and] grapple with the ongoing force of the 'mother tongue' […] in ways that seek to disrupt the homology between language and ethno-cultural identity that the paradigm installs."[19] Rather than privileging conceptions of poetic culture based in nationalist conceptions of essential and authentic meanings associated with the essentialized identities of a national target audience, Orbita never allows us to forget that all languages are multiple and all acts of reading are mediated negotiations across sometimes unbridgeable gulfs, both within a "single" language and without. Orbita's heterotopia counters geopolitical realities that hem it in from all sides – more and more emphatically since the hardening of the international border with Russia since the start of the Crimea Crisis in 2014. When I asked Semyon Khanin how he felt speaking Russian after Crimea, he said, with his typical wit, that he was now always concerned when he spoke Russian that someone would run out from around the corner to defend his language rights. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 brought significant transformations for the Orbita project, as it has did for Russophone culture in many places. The group no longer publishes in the Russian Federation or collaborates with projects based there—and many of its past collaborators have themselves become émigrés, their projects and platforms closed down. Artur Punte, who was originally one of the most dedicated proponents of Russian language as a legitimate language of Latvian social life, has recently announced that he will no longer write or perform poetry in Russian, but rather only in Latvian. All of this seems to threaten the transformation of the Orbita project from an actual and heterotopic one, aiming at an unexpected, but not impossible alternate configuration of human life, into a purely utopian one. Yet it also suggests that Orbita's heterotopia is needed now, more than ever, in Riga and elsewhere.

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